

Dutch Treat

Funding religious schools in the Netherlands has led to religious integration.

By Lois Sweet

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Walk down any street in Amsterdam and the diversity of peoples in that country is overwhelming. A country with half the population of Canada is squeezed into an area four-fifths the size of Nova Scotia. People living together at such close quarters had to develop coping techniques. And so the Dutch chose tolerance.

Since 1917, the Dutch have been funding religious schools, but it took 60 years of what they called "the school struggles" to arrive at that decision. The debate was long and divisive.

Both Protestants and Catholics wanted their own schools fully funded by taxpayers. The socialists — or secularists, as we'd refer to them today — were vehemently opposed. They were committed to "the common school," or "the people's school for the entire people," in which religion would be completely banned.

Their fear, as expressed by one opponent, was that the Netherlands would return to the conditions of the 16th century, when Holland was fractured along religious lines.

Despite prophesies of doom and gloom, the Dutch experience has proved otherwise. In 1917, Dutch legislators decided that enough was enough. Everyone was fed up with fighting about schools. People wanted to get on with their lives.

And so they took the route that was both most democratic and of least resistance. They decided to allow any group of parents — religious or non-religious — who wanted their own school to open it, and to operate it at taxpayers' expense.

The upshot is that today 80.5% of all schools are publicly-funded religious schools. Almost 77% of all students attend those schools.

I decided to visit an Islamic school to learn about its experience. The principal, Rahmat Khan Abdur Rahman, was dressed in a long, sparkling white tunic, worn over equally white long pants. I saw the faces of children from 15 different nationalities poring over their textbooks.

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Country	Mean
Taiwan	57
Singapore	57
Alberta	56
Hungary	55
Japan	55
Korea	55
Netherlands	55
British Columbia	54
Australia	54
Quebec	54
Czech Republic	54
England	54
Finland	54
Slovak Republic	54
Belgium (Flemish)	54
Slovenia	53
Canada	53
Hong Kong	53
Russia	53
Ontario	52
Bulgaria	52
United States	52
Newfoundland	51
New Zealand	51
Latvia	50
Italy	49
Malaysia	49
Lithuania	49
Thailand	48
Romania	47
Israel	47
Cyprus	46
Moldova	46
Macedonia	46
Jordan	45
Iran	45
Indonesia	44
Turkey	43
Tunisia	43
Chile	42
Philippines	35
Morocco	32
South Africa	24

The principal told me that this school is the children's ticket to integrating into Dutch society. Somehow, I wasn't expecting to hear that word from him. In retrospect, I suppose it's because the general assumption in Canada is that, if people want to educate their children in religious ghettos, then they're actively resisting integration.

Mr. Rahman explained, "Our philosophy is, if we want to integrate into a multi-faith society, then children should know their own religion and culture. They should come from a position of strength in order to contribute to society. If they have nothing to contribute, then they will be assimilated."

Dutch Catholics argue that separate schools made their integration into Dutch society possible. At the turn of the century, Catholics were very much the underclass. Today, they're on a par with the rest of society.

One spokesman put it this way. "It's better to operate from a situation of safety in the world than to be forced to mingle with a society you don't trust. This leads to more seclusion and more insecurity."

I left the Netherlands with much to ponder. It's clear that the Dutch decision to fund all religious schools is contributing to a stable society. While some Canadians believe it's a mistake to compare Canada with the Netherlands because that country is historically and culturally so different from ours, I'm not convinced this means we have nothing to learn from the Dutch.

They have an 80-year history of funding religious schools, and the result thus far seems to point to social integration, not social division.

People on all sides agree that differences have narrowed, not grown. This has undoubtedly been in part because a policy of equality and tolerance has contributed to the integration and emancipation of religious minorities.

(Adapted with permission from God in the Classroom, McClelland & Stewart, Inc.)